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Influence of competition intensity on strategic response of multinational corporations: a study of multinational corporations in Kenya

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Abstract

This study focused on the influence of competition intensity on strategic response of multinational corporations in Kenya. Multinational corporations (MNC) operate in a business environment characterized by interconnected processes of globalization that exposes them to fierce market competition forces in the host countries. Increased competition among MNCs in Kenyan market necessitates the development and choice of appropriate response strategies. The main objective developed for this study is to determine whether the choice of a strategic response by a multinational corporation depends on the intensity of competition in an industry. The data for this study was collected using a questionnaire that contained measurement of competition intensity and strategic response. The questionnaire consisted of a Likert type scale that ranged from 5- strongly agree to 1- strongly disagree. The study was conducted by administering questionnaires to 165 multinational corporations out of 213 total population, from which 141 were received representing a 85.4% response rate. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and further binary logistic regression analysis was conducted. The results showed that competition intensity significantly influenced the strategic response of multinational corporations. The study concluded that competition intensity in an industry determines strategic choices of multinational corporations.

Keywords: competition intensity; multinational corporations; strategic response; strategy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Multinational corporations (MNC) have for a long time played a critical role in international trade and that they are key players in the global economy through their activities in host countries (Ogutu and Samuel, 2011). MNCs are increasingly conducting their business in a global platform which has increasing complexity due to interconnected processes of globalization and internationalization of businesses (Ball et al., 2008 and Boschman, 2006). The greatest challenge facing MNCs is fierce market competition forces and changing business priorities in the host countries (Ekaterina, 2008). According to Yabs (2007) and Harrison et al. (2000), competition is the rivalry that exists between firms for selling their products or services of a particular category to the same segment of customers and it is an important determinant of choice of strategies that organization employ to attain competitive position and enhance their performance (Owuor, 2011; Bernard and Koerte, 2007; and Hellriegel et al., 2005). In the last 10 years, MNCs operating in Kenya have been employing varied strategies to cope with the increasing competitive business environment including stepping up expansion plans, franchise sell-off, differentiation initiatives of products and markets, industry exits and relocation from Kenyan market altogether (Owuor, 2011 and Okoth, 2010).

Bernard and Koerte (2007) contend that competition among industry players presents itself in four main aspects which are competition intensity in the industry, firm's product quality, firm's product cost and the firm's marketing experience. These aspects of competition are derived from Michael Porter's forces of industry competition model (Wheelen and Hunger, 2005) and from David Garvin's product quality theory (Juran, 1988). MNCs respond to competition by employing one or a combination of six strategies which include cost leadership, relocation, product differentiation, market differentiation, avoidance and deterrent strategies (Boschman, 2006). These responsive strategies are derived from Strategic Choice model by Kochan Thomas (Kochan et al., 1984) and Porter's generic competitive strategies (Porter, 1980). Competition among market players varies from industry to industry and from country to country and how market players respond and cope depends on individual firm objectives and capabilities, hence the need to understand how organizational strategies are influenced by competition. Many researches in this area of study have only concentrated on strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation (London and Hart, 2004 and Bamberger and Meshoulam, 2000). Some researchers have however indicated that organizations are active participants in the business environments, and therefore their responses to various environmental stimuli is worth understanding (Cui et al., 2005), a thing that necessitates this study.

1.1 Research problem

Despite great emphasis laid on research work in the field of industry competition, there is inadequate literature on the role of competition in determining strategic response of MNCs in developing countries according to Bernard and Koerte (2007) and Wilburn (2011), Kenya being one of them. In its effort to attain a middle income economy status by year 2030, Kenya aims at attracting large MNCs through Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and enhance Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the manufacturing sector (GOK, 2007). However, these initiatives face a major challenge because MNCs operating in Kenya faces fierce competition that forces them to employ different response strategies and the last 10 years alone Kenya has witnessed market exits, relocation to other countries, franchise sell out, cutting on operations and differentiation strategies from MNCs (Wilburn, 2011; Okoth, 2010; Bernard and Koerte, 2007).

According to Ball et al. (2008), the modern day organizations are operated in an atmosphere of ever changing information communication technology and globalization. These factors, coupled with dynamic market conditions have led to stiff competition among business entities. MNCs are particularly faced by fierce market competition forces in the foreign markets and in order to remain viable and profitable, they employ various responsive strategies (Wilburn, 2011). What is lacking is the literature on specific strategies that a MNC can employ when faced by competition. Studies have shown that MNCs that strategically respond to competition improve their business performance and are able to remain competitive than those that do not (Bernard and Koerte, 2007).

Despite all this, there has been no study conducted to establish the influence of competition intensity in an industry on the choice of strategic response of MNCs throughout the world, particularly in developing economies. A few studies that have been done in Kenya have focused on coping strategies of MNCs, competitive strategies of multinational banks and effects of strategies on market share (Kioko, 2012; Ogutu and Nyatichi, 2012 and Ogutu & Samuel, 2011). A study carried out in USA and German MNCs concentrated on the strategic responses of Least Cost Countries and did not address how competition intensity influences choice of strategy.

The departure of this study from previous ones is the investigation of the direct influence of competition intensity on the choice of strategic response to counter the competing forces by a MNC in the host country. There lacks adequate literature and researched models to explain this situation which this study aims at providing by answering the question: is the choice of strategic response of MNCs influence by competition intensity in the industry of the host country?

1.2 Objective of the study

The objective for the study is to determine if the choice of strategic response of a multinational corporation is influenced by competition intensity in the industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature shows that the present day businesses are operating in interconnected processes that include globalization, internationalization and transnationalization which cause fundamental changes in competitive strategies of economies and companies (Ball et al., 2008 & Boschman, 2006). Fierce competition and constantly changing conditions in an industry force companies to use different instruments of strategic planning to achieve long-term advantages (Ekaterina, 2008). A corporation is most concerned with the intensity of competition within its industry which is determined by industry competitive forces that include threat of new entrants, threat of substitute products or services, bargaining power of buyers, bargaining power of suppliers and rivalry among existing firms (Wheelen & Hunger, 2005 and Porter, 1980). In most industries, corporations are mutually dependent and any competitive move by one firm can be expected to have a noticeable effect on its competitors. This effect in turn causes retaliation or counter efforts, which are referred to as a strategic response (Cui et al., 2005 and Porter, 2004).

2.1 Competition intensity in industry

Competition intensity refers to the degree to which a firm faces rivalry within its industry as determined by Michael Porter's industry competitive forces (Wheelen and Hunger, 2005). A study by Gibcus and Kemp (2003) on strategy and small firm performance concluded that a firm's strategy is influenced by competition intensity.

Amoako-Gyampah and Acquaah (2008) did a study on manufacturing strategy, competitive strategy and firm performance and arrived to a conclusion that competition influenced organization's cost leadership strategy.

Bernard and Koerte (2007) conducted a study on 423 Multinational Corporations in USA and Germany and found that when operating in foreign markets, MNCs face stiff competition due to number of industry players, low cost of production and products quality in the host countries.

From the literature, it has been found that the intensity of competition in Kenyan market is described by five factors (Waeyenberg, 2006). They include the internal rivalry among the industry players, exhibited by the presence of many organizations in the industry and the level of aggressiveness in marketing their products; threat of new entrants into the industry; threat of substitute products as exhibited by the presence of similar brands and the ease at which consumers can find alternative suppliers of their requirements and the market share of the industry players (Porter, 1985).

2.2 Strategic response of MNC

Strategy is the planning aspect of management which defines the direction in which the organization is going in order to achieve its objectives (Armstrong, 2006). Strategy is also defined as the creation of a fit between external characteristics and the internal conditions of an organization to solve a strategic problem (Klaas, 2004 and Porter, 1985). In this context, fit is defined as a match between the organizational structure and contingency factors that have effect on firm's competitiveness and performance (Bernard and Koerte, 2007). Cui et al. (2005) and Avison et al. (2004) argue that a firm is a proactive participant in the environment and is capable of adapting its strategy to be responsive to its environment which this study discusses as strategic response. In his study, Mukiri (2012) defined strategic response as the action that an organization takes to align itself with the environment. There are two distinct categories of strategic action available to a firm. First category is that of organizational strategies, which refer to situations where companies seek to actively fit their strategies to the existing environment through cost leadership, product differentiation, and market differentiation strategic choices (Porter, 1980). The second category is that of environmental strategies with which a firm aims at manipulating the environment in such a way that fit between strategy and the environment is established through relocation, avoidance and deterrent strategic choices (Wilburn, 2011). As such, literature has identified six strategic choices that a firm can employ as a response to competition, which include cost leadership, Relocation, product differentiation, market differentiation, avoidance and deterrent strategies.

A study conducted by Bernard and Koerte (2007) on 423 Multinational Corporations in USA and Germany found that MNCs employ relocation, avoidance, and marketing differentiation strategies when faced by competition. They concluded that there is a significant correlation between competition and four out of six strategic responses. In their study on competitive strategies adopted by multinational banks in Kenya, Ogutu and Nyatichi (2012) concluded that when MNCs are faced by competition in an industry, they maintain their competitive edge by largely adopting differentiation strategies.

In his study on an analysis of competitive strategies effects on the market share of independent petroleum companies in Kenya, Kioko (2012) found that most independent petroleum companies in Kenya used product differentiation and market differentiation strategies to counter industry competition. Ogutu and Samuel (2011) did a study on strategies adopted by multinational corporations to cope with Competition in Kenya and concluded that MNCs cope with competition by employing product and market differentiation. Another study was conduct by Mokaya et al. (2012) on Market positioning and organizational performance in the Airlines industry in Kenya and these researchers arrived to a conclusion that a firm's competitive positioning in the market plays a pivotal role in development and choice of its marketing strategy.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Based on the reviewed literature, it evident that the specific problem of the influence of competition intensity in an industry on the choice of strategic response of MNCs has not been researched, hence the need for this study. From the literature, competition intensity and strategic response have been selected as variables for the study. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the two variables under study: competition intensity and strategic response of MNCs in Kenya. In the model, competition intensity is the independent variable and strategic response is the dependent variable. The model shows the influencing effect of competition intensity on choice of strategic response of MNC.

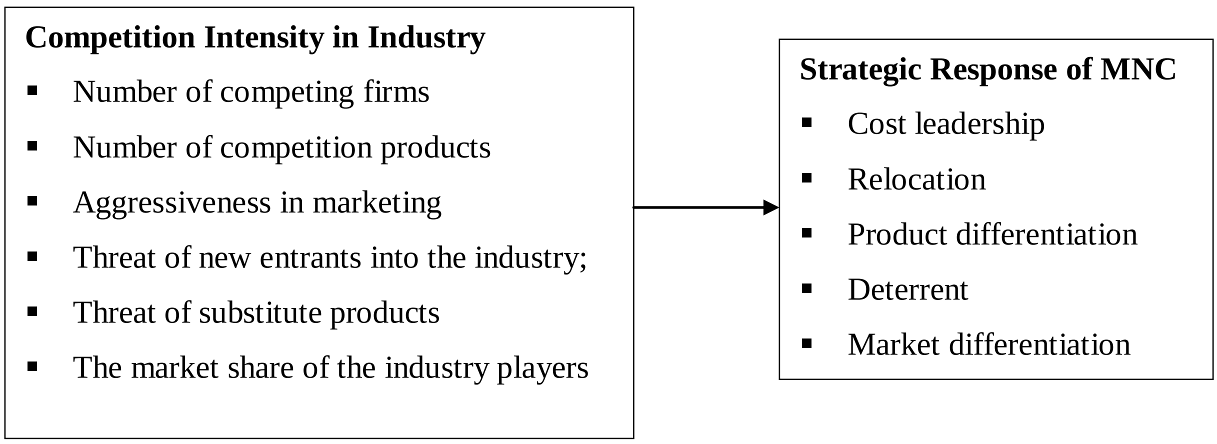

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used descriptive survey research design which enables a researcher to generate broad range of data from which to draw comparisons and differences. The questionnaire and interview guides were used as the main data collection instruments in order to gather accurate, less biased data and increase quality of the data collected (Oloko and Ogutu, 2012). The key respondents were the senior managers of the MNCs that included chief executive officers and heads of departments (Iravo, 2011). Their opinion was sought about the influence of competition intensity and strategic response of their firms. The population of study comprised all the 213 MNCs in Kenya (KAM, 2011).

A stratified sampling was done first to put the MNCs into three strata of manufacturing MNCs, service MNCs and those that do both manufacturing and service. This was followed by simple random sampling method that drew a sample from each stratum on disproportionate basis. The total number of the target sample was 165 MNCs to who the questionnaires were administered out of which 141 were filled and returned. The responses were such that 57 (40.4%) were from firms which are in manufacturing, 53 (37.6%) were from firms which were in service while 31 (22%) were from firms that were in both manufacturing and service, representing an overall response rate of 85.45% which is an adequate response rate for statistical reporting.

Data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires, interview guides, secondary data review and computer-based data review. Both primary and secondary data were collected because together with surveys and interviews techniques, they bring about validation of variables and enhance understanding in the area of study (Olsen, 2004 and Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). Primary data included whether there are many firms operating in the MNC's industry, the aggressiveness of the firms' marketing activities, the level of market share controlled by industry players, whether there are new entrants into the industry and the presence of substitute goods and alternative suppliers of similar products. The questionnaire further asked questions about strategies that MNCs employ to counter competition intensity, including cost leadership, relocation, product differentiation, market differentiation, avoidance and deterrent strategies. A 5 Likert type scale was used, ranging from 5 – strongly agree to 1- strongly disagree, to indicate the extent to which the respondents agreed with the statements that were given. Such method was used by Oloko and Ogutu (2012) and showed a reliability coefficient of more than 0.70.

3.2 Test of reliability

This study used Cronbach's alpha which ranges from 0 to 1.00 and is often considered a measure of item homogeneity where large alpha values indicating that the items are tapping a common domain (Cronbach, 1951). As shown in table 1, competition intensity was measured using 6 items and strategic response was measured using 6 items. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure internal consistency and the items yielded reliability measures of 0.758 and 0.802 competition intensity and strategic response respectively indicating that the items were reliable.

Table 1. Measurement of reliability for independent variables

Measurement Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Competition Intensity	6	0.758
Strategic response	6	0.802

3.3 Test of validity

Validity is about the accuracy of the data obtained in the study in representing the variables of the study. In this study, the validity of the measurement instruments was tested through the reviewing of the instruments by the experts to ascertain their validity. Validity was also tested through pilot testing the instruments, from which the question statements were restructured to attain a common understanding across the respondents. The data collection procedure was standardized, and the research assistants were taken through a common training. The face validity of items together with the estimates of Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients ensured that instruments validity was achieved.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics which showed the mean, standard deviations and the Spearman's correlation coefficients for the independent and dependent variables in the study. A binary logistic regression analysis was used to test the influence of competition intensity on strategic response of MNCs. The multicollinearity between independent variables was checked using logistic regression and the results indicated that all errors of the B coefficients were less that 2.0 meaning that there was no numerical problem of multicolliniearity (Hosmer and Lemeshow, 2000). This finding provided a further evidence of validity and reliability for measurement scales used in this study, as shown in table 2.

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Table 2. Checking for Multicollinearity

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1[a]	Competition Intensity in Indus	-1.643	.850	3.734	1	.050	.193
	Constant	-1.057	1.067	.981	1	.322	.348

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Competition Intensity

4.1 Descriptive analysis of competition intensity

The results shown in table 3 indicate that majority of the MNCs under this study agree with statements about industry competition that were put to them. However 71.6% of them disagreed that their competing firms control a small market share. These responses indicated that competition is very intense in their industries and the only way they have remained in business is by employing strategies that ensure that they retain their competitive positions (Kioko, 2012).

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of competition intensity

Statement about Industry Competition	Agree (%)	Not Sure (%)	Disagree (%)
There are many firms offering products/services similar to ours in the market	56.1	4.8	39
Firms in our industry are very aggressive in marketing their products/services	58.2	6.3	35.5
Our competitors control a very small market share in our industry	19.9	8.5	71.6
Our industry attracts many new organizations every year	66.7	6.4	26.9
It is not easy for our customers to find an alternative supplier offering same products	35.4	9.2	55.3
There are many brands that are similar to our products /services in the market	53.9	7.8	38.3

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4.2 Correlation analysis between competition intensity and strategic response

Spearman's correlation coefficients between independent and dependent variables was conducted to find out whether there was any relationship, association or correlation between them and of what magnitude and direction (Orodho, 2005). The findings indicated that Competition intensity in industry has a positive correlation with strategic response with Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of r = 0.220 which was significant (p = 0.009) at alpha = 0.01. This implies that completion intensity in the industry of a MNC has a linear relationship with the choice of a strategic response by a MNC and that for each unit increase in competition intensity, the chances of choosing a given strategic response increased by 0.22 times as shown in table 4.

Table 4. Correlation Analysis

			CI	SR
Spearman's rho	Competition Intensity in Industry	Correlation Coefficient	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)		
		N	141	
	Strategic Response	Correlation Coefficient	.220**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
		N	141	141

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CI – Competition Intensity

SR – Strategic Response

4.3 Relationship of competitions intensity to strategic response

The results in table 5 show that the probability of the Wald statistic for the variable Competition intensity in the industry was significant (p = 0.050) at alpha = 0.50. The null hypothesis that the B coefficient for Competition intensity was equal to zero was rejected. This supports the relationship that Competition intensity in an industry determines the choice of strategic response of Multinational Corporations and is consistent with the interpretation made by Gibcus and Kemp (2003).

Table 5. Relationship of Competitions Intensity to Strategic Response

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1[a]	Competition Intensity in Indus	-1.643	.850	3.734	1	.050	.193
	Constant	-1.057	1.067	.981	1	.322	.348

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Competition Intensity

From the findings detailed in table 5, the value of Exp (B) was 0.193 which implies that a one unit increase in Competition intensity in an industry decreased the odds that MNCs choice of strategic response is influenced by competition intensity by 80.7%. This confirms the statement of the amount of change in the likelihood of belonging to 1 (Yes) of strategic response associated with a one unit change in competition intensity in an industry. This finding is consistent with that of Spearman's Correlation coefficient between competition intensity and strategic response which shown that there is a significant correlation, with coefficient of 0.220, that is significant (p = 0.009) at alpha = 0.01.These results confirmed the hypothesis that competition intensity in the industry has a significant influence on the choice of strategic response of MNCs in Kenya. As such, this implies that the choice of strategic response by MNCs is influenced by competition intensity in the host country.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at examining the influence of competition intensity in industry on the choice of strategic response of MNCs. The objective sought to determine if the choice of strategic response by MNCs depends on competition intensity in an industry. The hypothesis was tested using binary logistic regression analysis to find out the influence of competition intensity on the choice of strategic response of MNCs. The findings showed that competition intensity in an industry is indeed an influencing factor with a Wald statistic that is significant (p = 0.050) at alpha = 0.050 and value of Exp (B) was 0.193 which implies that a one unit increase in competition intensity in an industry decreased the odds that MNCs choice of strategic response is influenced by competition intensity by 80.7%. Thus the overall conclusion in this study is that the choice of strategic response of MNCs is influenced by competition intensity in the industry.

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